

The Honorable Colin L. Powell
Secretary of State
United States Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Powell:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (the Commission), I am writing to urge you to raise the protection of religious freedom in Vietnam prominently at the 57th session of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) and with Vietnamese officials during your upcoming trip to that country in July.

Despite the increase in religious practice among the Vietnamese people in the last 10 years, the Vietnamese government suppresses organized religious activities forcefully and monitors and controls religious communities. The government prohibits religious activity by those not affiliated with one of the six officially recognized religious organizations. Individuals have been detained, fined, imprisoned, and kept under close surveillance by security forces for engaging in “illegal” religious activities. In addition, the government uses the recognition process to monitor and control officially sanctioned religious groups: restricting the procurement and distribution of religious literature, controlling religious training, and interfering with the selection of religious leaders.

The Commission has looked closely at religious freedom and U.S. policy in Vietnam in the last year. In February 2001, the Commission held a public hearing in Washington, D.C. on Vietnam, and heard testimony from representatives of a number of Vietnamese religious communities, as well as experts on Vietnam and its relations with the United States. In addition, the Commission and its staff have met or otherwise communicated with representatives of the Vietnamese government, Vietnamese religious communities, and human rights organizations with expertise in Vietnam (including Vietnamese-American organizations), as well as academic experts and U.S. government officials. Although the Vietnamese government last year told us that it “welcomed” a visit by the Commission, it later informed us that Vietnam's Commission on Religious Affairs should host such a visit and that they would be unable to do so until at least May - the month when Commission membership changes and a trip is almost impossible.

The Commission invited Father Thaddeus Nguyen Van Ly, a Roman Catholic priest based near Hue, Vietnam, to testify at its February hearing and Fr. Ly submitted written testimony. Fr. Ly has been a persistent public critic of the Vietnamese government's failure to protect religious freedom-activity that led to his imprisonment for close to a decade. On March 5, 2001, the Vietnamese official media confirmed that the government has placed Fr. Ly under administrative detention (i.e. house arrest) for "publicly slandering" the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) and "distorting" the government's policy on religion. ¹ Although it is not clear that this action was taken against Fr. Ly because of his written submission to the Commission, the Commission remains deeply concerned that the Vietnamese government may be punishing Fr. Ly for his response to the Commission's invitation. The action of the Vietnamese government is clearly a demonstration of the government's continued suppression, not only of religious freedom, but of other fundamental human rights as well. Moreover, the Commission believes that the United States has the moral responsibility to support those Vietnamese citizens, including Fr. Ly, who have the courage to speak out in the pursuit of ideals that we share.

The Commission will make a number of recommendations on U.S. policy in Vietnam in its second annual report that will be released on May 1, 2001. However, in light of the start of the UNCHR session and the Vietnamese government's actions against Fr. Ly, the Commission is writing to you now to urge that you raise religious freedom and the circumstances of Fr. Ly both in Geneva and during your trip in July. The Commission believes that until religious freedom significantly improves in Vietnam, the U.S. government should initiate or support a resolution to censure Vietnam at the annual meeting of the UNCHR and should engage in a sustained campaign to convince other governments to support it. In addition, the Commission respectfully urges you to use the opportunity of your trip in July to engage the Vietnamese government in serious discussions of religious freedom in Vietnam, and recommends that you impress upon Vietnamese officials that the promotion of religious freedom is indispensable to the continuation of healthy and increasingly close relations between Vietnam and the United States.

Thank you for your consideration of the Commission's recommendations.
Respectfully,

Elliott Abrams
Chairman

cc: Honorable Colin L. Powell, Secretary of State John Duncan, Acting Assistant Secretary of Treasury for Legislative Affairs Office of the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom

¹ Associated Press, "Vietnam detains Catholic priest for testimony against U.S. trade pact," March 5, 2001; Steve Kirby, "Vietnam punishes priest who dared to speak out to US freedoms panel," Agence France Presse, March 4, 2001.

Hon. Elliott Abrams

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